



*There are many ways you can relax. Deep breathing, muscle relaxation, relaxation response and visualization are good ways to improve your health and reduce stress.*

**R**elaxation has many benefits. It can help you feel calmer, think more clearly, and relieve stress, headaches and tight muscles. Whether you want to take a break from a stressful day or manage your stress long-term, regular relaxation practice can help you get back to a calmer state.

There are many ways to relax. Common methods are: deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, relaxation response and visualization. In practicing these skills, it is important to find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed. Try out each exercise for 10 to 20 minutes a day to see what helps you most.

Developing these skills may be slow at first, but once you have trained your mind and body to relax, you'll be able to get to a relaxed state quickly.

## Deep breathing

When done with purpose, deep breathing helps calm you down. It can help you let go of stress and worries and focus on the present moment.

### *How to do deep breathing*

Find a comfortable lying down or sitting position. When starting out, it may help to do deep breathing lying down on your bed or on the floor.

- Bend your knees and place your feet comfortably apart. Loosen any tight clothing. Uncross your legs and arms and close your eyes.
- *Inhale.* Place both hands on your lower stomach and breathe in as deeply as you can so that the incoming air expands that area and gently pushes against your hands. Breathe in to the count of six. If it helps, imagine a balloon in your stomach is inflating when you inhale.
- *Exhale.* Imagine the tension and stress leaving your body as you slowly breathe out. Imagine the balloon in your stomach is deflating.
- With each breath, think to yourself, "I am relaxing and letting go. I feel very comfortable and relaxed. My breath is calm and regular."

- Practice this several times. Keep your eyes closed and direct your attention to your breathing as it flows in and out.

Start with five deep breaths. This may take 1 to 2 minutes. Slowly increase your practice time to five minutes.

If you feel light-headed, dizzy, or anxious, you may be breathing too deeply or quickly. If this happens, stop for a moment and breathe normally until the symptoms pass. Inhale and exhale through your nose to prevent hyperventilation.

## Progressive muscle relaxation

The body responds to tense situations with muscle tension, which can cause pain or discomfort. Progressive muscle relaxation will help you reduce stress-related health problems, become more relaxed and fall asleep easier.

This exercise involves tensing and releasing each muscle group. By tightening then releasing a muscle, it will relax to its pre-tensed state and allow your body to feel more relaxed than it was before the exercise.

You may use a recording to go through all the muscle groups, or just follow the instructions below.

**Note:** If you have fibromyalgia or myofascial pain syndrome, check with your health care professional before practicing progressive muscle relaxation.

*How to do progressive muscle relaxation*

- Pick a place where you can stretch out comfortably, such as on a mat or carpeted floor. Close your eyes, and mentally scan the areas of your body that feel tense or tight.
- Inhale as you tense a muscle group. Hold the tension for 4 to 10 seconds. The sensation should be hard, but not to the point of cramping.
- Release the muscles as you exhale, and give yourself 10 to 20 seconds to relax.
- As you continue the exercise, notice what you feel in each area of your body. Imagine you are breathing relaxation into the area and letting go each time you exhale.

*How to tense muscle groups*

- Hands: Make a fist.
- Wrists and forearms: Extend arms and bend hands back at the wrist.
- Biceps and upper arms: Make a fist, bend arms at the elbows, and flex biceps.
- Triceps: Straighten and feel tension along back of the arms.
- Shoulders: Shrug them.
- Forehead: Wrinkle it into a deep frown.
- Eyes and bridge of the nose: Close eyes as tightly as possible. (Remove contact lenses before beginning this exercise).
- Cheeks and jaw: Grin from ear to ear.
- Around the mouth: Press lips together tightly.
- Tongue: Press against roof of mouth.
- Neck: Press head back as far as it will go against the supporting surface. Roll head to the right, to the left, and bring forward to your chest.

- Chest: Take a deep breath, hold it, and exhale.
- Back: Arch up and away from the supporting surface.
- Stomach: Suck into a tight knot, then release.
- Hips and Buttocks: Squeeze buttock cheeks tightly together.
- Thighs: Clench hard.
- Calves and lower legs: Flex toes toward your face, as if trying to bring them to touch your head.
- Lower legs and feet: Point toes away from your head and curl them downward at the same time.

**Relaxation response**

Relaxation response slows the heart rate and breathing, lowers blood pressure and relieves muscle tension. It also helps reduce stressful feelings and refocuses your thoughts.

*How to do relaxation response*

- Sit quietly in a comfortable position with your eyes closed. Become aware of your breathing.
- Breathe slowly and steadily from your belly, not from your chest.
- Each time you breathe out let out a deep sigh ("ahhhh") silently or aloud.
- You can also choose to fix your gaze on a stationary object while breathing quietly. A mental stimulus helps shift your mind away from distracting thoughts.
- Continue this for 10 to 20 minutes. Allow distracting thoughts to drift away, like waves on the beach.

- Sit quietly until you are ready to open your eyes.

**Visualizing a special place**

While practicing relaxation response, it may also help to think of a place that you find relaxing and comfortable. As you close your eyes and breathe, think of that special place. It may be at home, or someplace such as the beach or the mountains.

*How to do visualization*

- Imagine all the details: Smells, sounds, colors. Let yourself get comfortable in this spot.
- Let go of all your stresses. Continue to breathe deeply. For 10 to 20 minutes, enjoy your special place.
- Sit quietly for a few minutes, breathing deeply, until you are ready to open your eyes.

Be patient and gentle with yourself as you start your journey to greater relaxation. Once you have a routine to practice these techniques, stress reduction and relaxation should come with little effort.

**Additional resources:**

- Visit our Website at [kp.org/mindbody](http://kp.org/mindbody).
- For a customized online stress management plan, check out: [kp.org/healthylifestyles](http://kp.org/healthylifestyles).